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Catchline: ON THE DRY SIDE 414

The Family in the Welfare State

John Hyde

We read every day of high divorce rates, of child abuse and of homeless children, and we are subjected to a barrage of criticism of familial relationships. It seems all is not well with families but are its alternatives as good?

Unfortunately, in spite of the growing catalogue of its shortcomings, we know surprisingly little about 'the family'. Unlike 'the state', libraries are not filled with treatises about its nature and its responsibilities. A 284 page book *The Family in the Welfare State,* by Dr Alan Tapper, published by Allen and Unwin in association with the Australian Institute for Public Policy, does something to rectify the deficiency. Dr Tapper is a philosopher at the University of Western Australia. I predict that he will not please some socialists, militant feminists and welfare bureaucrats, but the internal logic and common sense of his arguments will be hard to dismiss.

Social relationships, he tells us, are arranged concentrically---family, various voluntary associations such as firms and clubs and, on the outside, the all-powerful state. The family, not the state, however, is the fundamental social unit. It pre-dates the state by at least several millenia and today, unless one is singularly unfortunate or badly behaved, one experiences more of one's family than one's government.

In many things families' and governments' interests coincide; families and governments, nevertheless, compete for people's loyalties. Since the Second World War, state welfare growth has produced a strong tendency for the state, through its tax and subsidy policies, to favour subsidised childcare and the sole-parent family at the expense of the conventional family.

Politicians, no doubt encouraged by the welfare bureaucracy, have gone along with a tendency to devalue

parental care. While claiming not to discriminate between people with differing social preferences and professing great concern for 'the family', in fact, politicians have caused the state to subsidise the break up of nuclear two-parent families. According to Tapper, the Commonwealth family assistance budget now spends only one dollar on a child in a two-parent family for each ten dollars spent on a comparable child in a sole-parent family.

Surely this is a dangerous practice. In spite of falling well short of perfection, most two-parent families succeed in giving their members physical and psychological support, and few people think that, in general, children have been advantaged by the higher levels of family break-up.

Thanks to the work of the Australian Institute of Family Studies and some others, we know something about the consequences of marriage break up---but much less, indeed very little, about its causes. Because of this lack of knowledge, Tapper describes his own analysis as suffering from a void at its centre. In passing, he knocks much of the conventional wisdom on the head.

The 'divorce epidemic' is not caused by the 1975 *Family Law Act*. First, the epidemic is not just an Australian phenomenon and, second, the divorce rate rose before the Act became law. If the two year peak following passage of the Act is ignored, then the trebling of the divorce rate was arrived at via a remarkably smooth curve rising steadily from 1970 to 1982. It seems that social change caused the legal change, and not vice versa.

Neither do economic conditions seem to be a significant cause of rising divorce rates. Although, during the 1970s most Western economies did slow down while trying to digest the neo-Keynesian excesses of the sixties, average living standards did not fall. Many more women entered the paid workforce but it is hard to sustain the thesis that they did so out of economic necessity. Alternatively, those who claim that divorce is a consequence of rising living standards have to explain why the epidemic happened in the seventies---that is, when economic growth was slowing down. The Australian researcher Alan Jordon has found that, with only a minor exception, broken families have no economic distinguishing features. Tapper also disposes of several other less likely hypotheses.

It seems unlikely that the desire to enter the paid workforce can explain the phenomenon. Divorce and separation are more likely than marriage to 'relegate' women to the traditional roles of child-carer and homemaker!

Tapper claims there are many good reasons to have expected an improvement in family stability and success in the 1970s. Teenage marriages fell: these are now at the lowest level in Australian history. The overall rate of first marriages has declined and we must, therefore, presume that

some people for whom marriage was a poor option have been screened out.

Of all the many 'explanations' for the sudden rise in the divorce rate, only three is he unable to dispose of. They are the often-remarked male emotional immaturity; the stresses of women's growing public independence; and the intervention of the welfare system in a way that is biased against two-parent families. Tapper does not believe these explanations are sufficient to explain such a radical change. Neither do I, but I have nothing to add.

Dr Tapper discusses much more than divorce. The book includes chapters the welfare debate, feminism, taxation, education and policies for the aged; and it provides a critical running commentary on the Federal Government's expensive social security review. In the process he plays havoc with several of my favourite prejudices. He argues tightly, and I am sure he will also raise difficulties for other people's quite different prejudices.

At the end of the day, he calls for a radical shift in public policy: Do not subsidise family breakdown. He wants the state to treat separated and divorced families in exactly the same way it treats intact families. And, in the interests of equity between broken and complete families, between people with and without dependents and between the elderly and those rearing children, do support families that support their children by staying together.

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